

## ***"Have you not read...?" Christians, Jews and Scripture in Justin's Dialogue with Trypho***

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Within the Christian Bible, there is one body of scriptural texts that is exclusively Christian, another that is shared with non-Christian Jews. These shared scriptures are the texts that Christians call the "Old Testament" and that Jews often refer to as the "Tanak" (an acronym formed from the initial letters of the Hebrew terms for "law", "prophets" and "writings": *Torah, Nebi'im, Kethubim*). Yet the difference in terminology points to a profound difference in the way these texts are understood within the two traditions. So profound is this difference that it may lead us to question the very idea of a shared scripture. Can an object still be said to be "shared" when there is fundamental disagreement about what it is?

One way to understand this disagreement would be to suggest that Jews experience a direct relationship with scripture whereas for Christians that relationship is indirect. For Christians, the Old Testament is mediated through Jesus and the New Testament; for Jews, there is no such mediation. On this view, Judaism is simply a natural continuation of the religion of the Tanak, or Old Testament: thus Jews typically observe scriptural commandments relating to male circumcision and the sabbath, whereas Christians typically do not. This view, or something like it, may underlie the expression "Old Testament" – for the *Vetus Testamentum* is actually the *palaia diathēkē*, the "old covenant" which is "old" in relation to the "new covenant" promised by the prophet Jeremiah and, for Christians, realized in Christ. Insofar as it is old, then, the old covenant is superseded by the new, which abolishes such rites as sabbath observance and circumcision, and above all includes Gentiles within the covenant community. If the new covenant is unlike the old, and if the Old Testament is the book of the old covenant, then the relation between Christians and the Old Testament may seem to be an indirect one. In contrast, it may be said, Jews still seek to live under the Sinai covenant, and stand in direct continuity with the texts that document that covenant.

This account of the differing Jewish and Christian relationships to scripture is seriously inadequate, however. It overlooks the fact that Judaism itself is founded on the discontinuity with scripture created by the loss of temple and land as a result of the two disastrous revolts against Rome. The destruction of the temple makes much of the legislation of the Torah impracticable, and a Judaism that has adapted to the loss of the temple has accommodated itself to a discontinuity with the Torah that may be compared with its Christian equivalent. Conversely, the idea that Christian faith necessarily entails an indirect relationship to the Sinai legislation needs to be qualified: one thinks for example of the profound concern within the Protestant Reformed tradition with the commandments prohibiting idolatry and enjoining sabbath observance. The claim that Judaism stands in a more direct relationship to the Torah than does Christianity might be ventured as a statement of faith, either by a Jew or by a Christian. This would not be a neutral statement of fact, however, for in both traditions the

Torah or Pentateuch is apprehended only by way of an ongoing interpretative activity that goes far beyond any mere repetition of what is written in the text.

Similarly, if it were claimed that Christian faith stands in close continuity with the Old Testament prophets, who in various ways anticipate the coming of Christ, this too would be a statement of faith that cannot be demonstrated by appeal to neutral criteria. For both Jews and Christians, the relationship to scripture is an indirect one mediated by a developing tradition which determines how the texts are to be interpreted. The idea that either community can demonstrate a direct continuity with scripture – with the Torah in the case of Jews, perhaps, the prophets in the case of Christians – is hermeneutically naïve. Readers or hearers of sacred texts may believe themselves to be in immediate relation to the texts, addressed by them so simply and directly that there is no place left for any mediating tradition. Yet any encounter with a scriptural text will be enabled by a specific tradition of interpretation and use which predetermines the way the text presents itself to us. The different traditions of Jews and Christians ensure that the texts will be read differently; yet the difference will not be between a reading that is demonstrably right and a reading that is demonstrably wrong, one that is in clear continuity with the texts and one that is not. The difference arises from different rules of engagement with the texts, reflecting divergent and incommensurable systems of belief and practice.

To substantiate this point, I shall take two examples selected from the opening chapters of Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, a text dating from around 160 CE in which Justin stages a debate between himself and a Jewish dialogue-partner about the true sense of the scriptures. In the first example, the Christian responds to the scriptural hermeneutic of the Jew, which gives absolute priority to the practice of the Torah. In the second example, the Christian defends a messianic reading of a scriptural text which, for the Jew, refers to historical circumstances in the distant past.

While the *Dialogue with Trypho* must reflect actual debates between Christians and Jews, it is in itself a literary fiction – like the Platonic dialogues on which it is modelled. Also derived from the Platonic genre are the conventions that one dialogue-partner take the leading role (Justin here stands in for Socrates) and that the dialogue be undertaken in a generally constructive spirit. The dialogue form often serves as a pretext for lengthy scriptural expositions in which Trypho's interventions are minimal. At one point, indeed, Justin tacitly admits that his own expositions are excessively long and repetitive, by having Trypho politely contradict his own claim that they are short and to the point:

“And in stating these things, Trypho”, said I, “as far as time permits [ὡς ἐγγωρεῖ], I endeavour to do so for the sake of those who came with you today, yet briefly and concisely.” Then he replied, “You do well; and although you are repeating the same things, and at great length, be assured that I and my companions listen with pleasure.”  
(*dial.* 118)

Evidently, Trypho's main aim is simply to become informed about the strange new Christian reading of scripture, which he has heard about but never before encountered at first hand. Although he makes a number of concessions to Justin's arguments, he is temperamentally sceptical as well as loyal to his own tradition, and there is never any question of his conversion. At certain points, however, he takes on a more active role, articulating what Justin takes to be orthodox Jewish readings of scripture. One could wish that the clash

between Jewish and Christians readings were more effectively dramatized here, but it is not entirely absent. Trypho, of course, is a literary Jew created by a Christian author, not an authentically Jewish voice. Authentic Jewish responses to early Christian teaching are lacking, however, and we must make do with a literary substitute who presumably seemed plausible to Justin's first readers.

### ***The Torah or the Prophets?***

The *Dialogue* opens with a stylized autobiographical account of Justin's philosophical quest, which leads him first to Plato, then to Christ. The human relationship to the divine is now enabled not by a natural kinship between God and the soul but by the Jewish prophetic writings, far older than Plato, which announce the coming of the incarnate Logos. In Trypho's view, however, Justin the Gentile philosopher would have done better to remain faithful to Plato, "rather than being deceived by false words and following people of no reputation" (8.3). Trypho initially approached Justin with a view to edifying philosophical conversation, and he is perhaps disappointed to find that this man in the garb of a philosopher is actually a member of a despised religious sect. For Trypho, Justin might have found salvation through Plato, but he will certainly not find it in his so-called Christ. If he is interested in Jewish scripture, he should obey it and become a real Jew:

If you are prepared to listen to me – for I already regard you as a friend – first of all have yourself circumcised, then observe what is ordained about the sabbath and the festivals and the new moons of God, and, in sum, do all things written in the law [τὰ ἐν τῷ νόμῳ γεγραμμένα πάντα ποίει]; and then you will perhaps obtain mercy from God. But as for Christ, if he has been born and exists somewhere, he is unrecognized and does not even know himself and has no power, until Elijah comes to anoint him and make him manifest to everyone. But you [pl.], having accepted a baseless report, fabricate a Christ for yourselves and for his sake now heedlessly perish. (*dial.* 8.4)

According to Trypho, Justin should learn that scripture is most fundamentally not about Christ. When the Christ comes, he will be recognized not by conforming to some scriptural blueprint but through the testimony of Elijah, who will return from his heavenly dwelling place in order to make him known. Thus messianic claims made by ordinary mortals who think they have found the Messiah are ruled out on principle. Reticent about the Messiah, scripture is most fundamentally about our conforming to the divine commandments: that is the way to salvation, whether or not the Messiah comes. Trypho's exhortation, "Do all things written in the law" echoes the language of Deuteronomy. In placing these words in his mouth, Justin may be influenced by the Pauline rendering of Deuteronomy 27.26, where a curse is pronounced on whoever "does not abide in all things written in the book of the law to do them" (Gal.3.10). The curse on those who do not practise what is written in the law implies a blessing on those who do, and Trypho interprets this blessing in terms of divine "mercy", or eschatological salvation. Again, there is possible Pauline influence here. In Galatians 3, the curse from Deuteronomy is followed by a positive counterpart from Leviticus: "The one who does these things shall live by them" (Lev.18.5, cited in Gal.3.12). The exhortation to "do all things written in the law, and then you will perhaps obtain mercy from God", may be seen as a paraphrase of the Leviticus text, couched in part in the language of Deuteronomy.

In Trypho's appeal to Justin, it is a Christian writer – Justin in his role as author rather than as main character – who constructs a Jewish doctrine of salvation through law observance, partly on the basis of Pauline antecedents. This again raises the question whether there is genuine dialogue in this text – whether, in other words, a real and credible Jew is actually present in it, or only a Christian image of what a Jew is necessarily like, bearing perhaps only a tenuous relation to the reality. Is Trypho just a Christian stereotype of the Jew? Does his doctrine of salvation by law-observance represent an actual Jewish belief, or is it a caricature stemming perhaps from Paul? If Trypho is no more than a stereotype or caricature, with little or no basis in reality, then we can no longer hope to learn much from this text about Christians and Jews in their relation to a shared scripture.

Paul, of course, speaks about Judaism not only as a Christian but as a former Pharisee. His direct or indirect testimony to the Judaism of his time cannot simply be discounted. His younger contemporary Josephus was also a Pharisee, and speaks about the relationship between law-observance and eschatological salvation in terms similar to Justin's Trypho. Every Jew, Josephus tells us,

has believed that, as the lawgiver has prophesied and as God's sure testimony has confirmed, God grants to those who keep the laws... to receive a better life in the revolution of ages. (*c.Ap.* ii.218)

Like Trypho, Josephus believes that those who observe the law will thereby attain eternal life, and assumes that this doctrine is taught by scripture itself. Trypho sounds less like Josephus in his emphasis on circumcision as the first and foremost of the law's requirements: "First of all, have yourself circumcised", he advises Justin. Yet Josephus knows of at least one teacher of Judaism to the Gentiles who insists on the importance of circumcision. In the final book of his *Antiquities*, he tells of the conversion to Judaism of Izates, king of Adiabene (a small kingdom on the River Tigris). Izates's original instructor in Judaism dissuades him from undergoing the rite of circumcision, but he changes his mind under the influence of a second Jewish teacher, Eleazar from Galilee. Josephus recounts how,

when [Eleazar] came in to greet him and found him reading the law of Moses, he said: "You have overlooked, O king, the most important matters [λανθάνεις τὰ μέγιστα], offending against the laws and so against God. For you must not only read them, but above all do the things commanded by them. How long will you remain uncircumcised? But if you have not yet read the law about this, read it now, so that you may become aware of your impiety." (*Ant.* xx.44)

Here as in Justin's *Dialogue*, the Jew (Eleazar, Trypho) confronts the Gentile already committed to the Jewish scriptures (Izates, Justin) with the scriptural demand for circumcision. In the light of these passages from Josephus, it is difficult to regard Trypho as a purely Christian stereotype.

A little later in the dialogue, Trypho returns to the themes of circumcision and law-observance, in the context of a critique of the Christian religion, about which he seems fairly well informed. Over against Christian claims, male circumcision is again seen as the gateway to the life of law-observance, which is itself the way to salvation. Echoes of Genesis 17 are unmistakable here:

This is what we find so extraordinary: that you [pl.], claiming to be religious and considering yourselves better than others, at no point differ from them, nor do you change your manner of life from that of the Gentiles; for you observe neither festivals nor sabbaths, nor are you circumcised, setting your hopes rather on a crucified man. You hope to obtain something good from God, but you do not keep his commandments! But have you not read *that that person shall be cut off from his people who is not circumcised on the eighth day*? This is also commanded for foreigners and slaves [περὶ τῶν ἀλλογενῶν καὶ περὶ τῶν ἀργυρωνήτων]. You [pl.] thoughtlessly despise this *covenant* and neglect the duties it entails – yet you try to persuade us that you know God, while observing none of the practices of those who fear God [μηδὲν πράσσοντες ὧν οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν]. (10)

Trypho here speaks in typical scriptural language of “observing” (τηρεῖν) or “keeping” (φυλάσσειν) the commandments, of “doing” (ποιεῖν) or “practising” (πράσσειν) them. And first and foremost of these commandments is the demand for circumcision, since, according to Genesis 17, this is the sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham and his seed, for all time:

And God said to Abraham, You shall keep [διατηρήσεις] my *covenant*, you and your seed with you to [all] their generations. And this is the *covenant* that you shall keep, between me and you and your seed after you to [all] their generations: every male among you shall be *circumcised*, and you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. And a child shall be *circumcised on the eighth day*, every male to [all] your generations, the member of your household and the *slave* bought from any foreigner [ἄπὸ παντός υἱοῦ αλλοτρίου], who is not of your seed. With circumcision shall the member of your household and *the slave* be circumcised, and my *covenant* shall be in your flesh as an everlasting *covenant*. And the uncircumcised male, the flesh of whose *foreskin is not circumcised on the eighth day*, *that person shall be cut off from his people*, because he has destroyed my *covenant*. (Gen.17.9-14 LXX)

The verbal links between Trypho's address and Genesis 17 are clear. Trypho draws his statement about the exclusion of the person who is not circumcised on the eighth day directly from Genesis 17.14; his unusual term for a “slave” (ἀργυρωνήτωρ) is drawn from the same chapter, which contains four of its six Septuagintal occurrences; and his association of circumcision and “covenant” is also based on this chapter. At one point, Trypho adapts the scriptural language slightly but significantly, to make its application to Justin the Gentile still clearer. Genesis extends the requirement of circumcision not only to Abraham's male “seed” and other family members and retainers, but also to “the slave bought from any foreigner” (17.12), that is, to “slaves from foreign nations [ἐξ ἀλλογενῶν ἔθνων]” (17.27). Trypho finds here an imposition of circumcision on two classes of people rather than one: the scriptural text is also concerned with “foreigners and slaves [περὶ τῶν ἀλλογενῶν καὶ περὶ τῶν ἀργυρωνήτων]” (*dial.* 10). As a Gentile, Justin is no more exempt from the requirement of circumcision than is Izates.

So clear is the message of Genesis 17 that Justin and Izates have only to read it in order to realize that circumcision is the first, essential step on the road that leads to salvation. “If you have not yet read the law about this, read it now”, Izates is counselled. Justin, who supposes himself well-versed in the scriptures, is challenged similarly: “Have you not read...?” Since circumcision is not just one act of law-observance among many but the indispensable sign of

the covenant, this single chapter of Genesis is really the heart and the foundation of the scriptural message. Other duties follow on after circumcision – very many of them, indeed, for there are many other commandments no less clear and specific than this one. Scripture here is viewed above all as a book of commandments. It prescribes the actions and abstentions that must be “observed”, “kept”, “done” or “practised” in order to ensure that the human passage through this world conforms to the will of the one and only God, the world’s creator and its destiny. For Trypho as for Eleazar, there is no real question about what scripture means. The only question is whether people will hear and obey it. Those who do obey it have shaped their lives into conformity to the text: they are Jews. In contrast, Christians stand in an arbitrary, anomalous and illogical relation to the text.

At this point, it is Justin who subverts an apparently unanswerable claim to direct conformity to scripture, showing it to be an interpretative construct which achieves its impressive clarity only by passing over other scriptural texts that might lead to quite other conclusions. (Later we shall see something similar happening to Justin’s Christian construal of scripture, which also claims a total conformity to scripture yet which cannot finally substantiate that claim.) In opposition to Trypho’s appeal to circumcision, covenant and commandments, Justin has at his disposal an array of scriptural arguments, derived in part from earlier Christian writings – notably the Letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, the Letter to the Hebrews, and the Letter of Barnabas. Justin is the heir to a tradition of Christian self-definition over against the non-Christian Jewish community that extends back over a century. He represents a turning point within this tradition, bringing the formative period to a close and establishing in broad outline a Christian scriptural hermeneutic that was further developed by successors such as Irenaeus and Tertullian – who redeployed it with a view to internal Christian debates generated by teachers such as Valentinus and Marcion. Justin sums up the tradition of scriptural interpretation as it has reached him, systematizing it, extending the range and depth of its coverage, and silently eliminating features he regards as inappropriate. The achievement is impressive, though ambivalent. On the debit side, Justin enthusiastically develops a polemical strategy derived primarily from the Letter of Barnabas, in which negative scriptural portrayals of the people of Israel are used to attack the Jewish community of the present. Like Barnabas before him and other Christian writers after him, Justin assumes that the entire Jewish people is still collectively responsible for the idolatry with the Golden Calf, and of the murder of the prophets and the Messiah. Christian theological development is in no way furthered by these sterile anti-Jewish scriptural polemics – whatever allowance one might make for historical context. On the other hand, it would be wrong to suppose that an anti-Jewish agenda determines Justin’s whole approach to scripture. His Christian alternative to a construal of scripture in terms of covenant and commandments should be neither lightly dismissed nor uncritically accepted.

Like Trypho, Justin assumes that his own reading of scripture is demonstrably and wholly correct, while the opposing reading is demonstrably and wholly false. Both assume that the beliefs and practices of their respective communities can be conclusively vindicated by the appeal to scripture. The reality of the dialogue is rather more interesting: it seems that the scriptural texts can comfortably accommodate both readings. The two readings are not groundless; they do not represent the violent imposition of alien ideologies onto the texts; in their different ways, they each make good their claim to have grasped the logic – or rather, a logic – of the scriptural texts. Yet each of the two readings exposes the limits of the other.

In response to Trypho, Justin appeals first to the fact that scripture speaks not just of the covenant at Horeb or Sinai, but of a "final law and a covenant most authoritative of all [τελευταίος νόμος καὶ διαθήκη κυριωτάτη πασῶν]": this final law or authoritative covenant is intended for all people, whereas the law given at Horeb is now old and was intended for the Jewish people alone (*dial.*11). "Have you not read what Isaiah says...?", Justin asks, echoing the incredulous "Have you not read...?" with which Trypho introduces his appeal to Genesis 17. A new, eternal law is promised:

Hear me, hear me, my people, and kings, give ear to me! For a law will go forth from me, and my judgment will be the light of the Gentiles. My righteousness swiftly draws near, and my salvation shall come forth, and in my arm shall Gentiles hope. (Is.51.4-5)

This "law", which is also the divine righteousness and salvation, the hope and the light of the Gentiles, is, simply, Christ. The idea of universal salvation here is clearer in LXX than in MT, and Justin exploits this to the full. It is crucially important for him is that the term "law" is identified here with God's universal saving action, and not with the Sinai covenant. But prophetic scripture redefines "covenant" as well as "law":

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will establish with the house of Israel and the house of Judah a new covenant, not the one that I established with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. (Jer.38.31-32 LXX)

Justin's logic here is drawn, directly or indirectly, from the Epistle to the Hebrews, which comments succinctly on this passage: "In saying 'new', he [God] has made the first covenant old..." (Heb.8.13a). Jeremiah does not extend the new covenant to Gentiles, however, which is why the Isaiah text is also needed. Putting the two prophetic passages together, we learn that God announces in them a new covenant which is to be the light of the Gentiles. If so, then Trypho's appeal to circumcision, covenant and commandments belongs to the past; it relates to an earlier phase in the unfolding divine relationship with the world. Analyzing the debate from the outside, we note how different starting points within the scriptural texts produce fundamentally different construals of scripture as a whole. In the one case, scripture points back to the complex event of the giving of the law, with its roots in God's covenant with Abraham. In the other case, scripture looks forward to a definitive divine saving action, universal in scope, which lies beyond its own boundaries. In one reading, scripture directs us to the past; in the other, to its own future.

Justin's first argument against Trypho's message of salvation through covenant and law is that these are declared in scripture itself to be provisional, anticipating a final law and covenant which operate on different principles. His second argument is based on the scriptural use of circumcision as a metaphor:

And through Moses God himself proclaimed, saying: "Circumcise your hardness of heart, and do not continue to harden your neck. For the Lord your God, the Lord of lords, is a great and strong and fearful God, who does not show *παρτιάλιψ' οὐ θαυμάζει πρόσωπον*], nor does he accept a gift." And in Leviticus: "Since they have transgressed against me and despised me, and because they have walked contrary to me, and I went contrary to them, I shall destroy them in the land of their enemies. Then shall their uncircumcised heart be turned." (*dial.*16, citing Deut.10.16-17; Lev.26.40-41)

Circumcision, Moses teaches, is a metaphor for the conversion of the heart. Jeremiah agrees, exhorting his hearers or readers to "circumcise the foreskin of your heart" (4.4, cited in *dial.* 28). Literal observance is superfluous. This motif of circumcision as metaphor enters Christian discourse through Paul (Rom.2.25-29; cf. Col.2.11), but is developed especially by the author of *Barnabas*, who cites the same texts from Jeremiah and Deuteronomy as Justin does, and argues, as Justin does not, that circumcision was never intended to be understood literally and that the people of Israel were misled on this point by an "evil angel" (Barn.9.1-6).

The covenant was provisional; circumcision now functions primarily as a metaphor; and, thirdly, circumcision cannot be a necessary precondition of righteousness. Why? Because, until Abraham, the righteous were all uncircumcised and yet were acceptable to God – Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Lot, Melchizedek (*dial.*19). Abel did not need to be circumcised for his gifts to be acceptable; nor was circumcision a precondition of Enoch's translation, or of Noah's entry into the ark, or of Lot's rescue from Sodom. Justin here elaborates the Pauline observation that Abraham was righteous through faith long before he was circumcised (Rom.4.9-12). Abraham, says Justin, echoing Paul, "was approved by God while in uncircumcision, by φαίτη<sup>ς</sup> ἐν ακροβυστία ἐπὶ τῇ πίστει], and was blessed, and was called father of many nations" (*dial.*11). While uncircumcised,

on account of the faith with which he believed God, he was justified and blessed [διὰ τὴν πίστιν ἣν ἐπίστευσεν τῷ θεῷ ἐδικαιώθη καὶ εὐλογήθη], as the scripture shows. But he received circumcision as a sign [σημεῖον], and not for righteousness... (*dial.*23).

A further argument: women do not receive circumcision, and yet are capable of righteousness (*dial.*23). Nature thereby confirms the teaching of Genesis, that circumcision is unnecessary for righteousness and salvation. Trypho's claim to the contrary is a fundamental misreading of scripture.

Or is it? Genesis 17 remains stubbornly resistant to a metaphorical reading. Here, the object of circumcision is not the heart, it is graphically physical – "the flesh of your foreskin" (v.11; cf. vv.14, 24). Since Justin cannot plausibly argue for a symbolic interpretation here, he offers instead an explanation that is both implausible and objectionable: circumcision was imposed, he thinks, so that Jews would be identifiable as such, marked out for the punishment that has overtaken them in the recent disastrous war against Rome. Circumcision is a "sign" only in that sense: it is no longer the "sign of the covenant" (Gen.17.11). Here, Justin clearly has the letter of the text against him. More plausible, at least *prima facie*, is the interpretation of Genesis 17 offered by the author of *Jubilees*:

This law is for all generations for ever; and there can be no reduction in the number of days, nor omission of even a single day out of the eight, for it is a rule for all time, ordained and written on the heavenly tablets. And everyone that is born, the flesh of whose foreskin is not circumcised on the eighth day, does not belong among the sons of the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham, but is marked out for destruction: there is no sign on him that he is the Lord's; and his destiny is to be destroyed and to perish and to be uprooted from the earth, because he has broken the covenant of the Lord our God. (Jub.15.25-26)

This is not an argument to appeal to Gentiles, whose very existence it ignores; but it is firmly rooted in the text of Genesis. Justin's counter-reading can similarly appeal to scriptural texts, but it also expresses the Gentile Christian conviction that a positive theological significance for circumcision is simply inconceivable. Gentile Christians do not want to hear from scripture about the flesh of the foreskin.

When Trypho asks Justin, "Have you not read...?", the reference is to Genesis 17. When Justin puts the same question to Trypho, the reference is to Isaiah and Jeremiah. In both cases, it is assumed that scripture is so transparent that one has only to read in order to understand. Yet neither Justin nor Trypho can show that the sense they find is actually the true sense of the scriptural texts. That is, neither of them can demonstrate that scripture *in its entirety* can be plausibly read through the lens of the selected texts to which they initially appeal. Scripture is open to diverse readings, each of which is capable of a high degree of coherence but neither of which can establish a total hegemony over the text. One reading gives hermeneutical priority to the law, the other to the prophets, and there are no neutral criteria for determining which of the two options is the more appropriate. And the reason for this undecidability is that the two readings are also two traditions which ensure that the same texts will always be read differently. What begins as an argument about a text ends by demonstrating the incommensurability of two religious cultures.

### ***Readings Messianic and Historical***

At the heart of Justin's hermeneutic lies the assumption that scripture is to be understood messianically. This might also be described as a "christological" reading of scripture, but the term "messianic" has the advantage of emphasizing that the Christian reading remains dependent on Jewish categories. A belief in the future coming of the Messiah or Christ is something that Trypho and Justin share. The difference is that Justin believes not only that the Messiah is to come but also that the Messiah has already come, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, born of the virgin Mary and crucified under Pontius Pilate. This leads Justin to formulate his well-known theory of the "two advents" (*parousiai*) of Christ. The theory is introduced after Justin has quoted at length from Isaiah 52-54, where the depiction of the suffering servant is followed by a celebration of the eschatological redemption of Jerusalem:

In these and other similar utterances of the prophets, O Trypho, some refer to the first coming of the Christ [εἰς τὴν πρώτην παρουσίαν τοῦ Χριστοῦ], in which it is announced that he is to appear as without glory or form and as a mortal. Others refer to his second coming, when he shall come [παρέσται] in glory and above the clouds, and your people shall see and shall recognize the one whom they pierced... (*dial.*14)

Justin returns to this theory of the two advents at several points in the dialogue, and in connection with different texts. Hermeneutically, it serves to extend greatly the range of messianic texts: for the Messiah is now to be found not only in texts which speak of the future perfection of the Davidic kingdom but also and above all in texts that speak of a purely individual figure: Isaiah's child born of a virgin mother, the persecuted, God-forsaken figure of Psalm 22, the exalted king of Psalm 110, and so on. Already in the Gospel of Matthew such texts are all firmly established in the repertoire of Christian messianism: here too Justin is the inheritor of an interpretative tradition, which he sums up while expanding its range. Where Justin differs from Matthew is that he develops a number of his messianic

interpretations in dialogue with a Jewish non-messianic interpretation. His treatment of Psalm 110 may serve as an example.

Psalm 110 (109 LXX) is attributed to David in both the Masoretic text and the Septuagint, and opens with a report of a divine appointment: "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a stool for your feet". In Matthew, following Mark, Jesus is reported as citing this text in order to demonstrate that the Messiah – whose installation it describes – is no mere "son of David", as the scribes teach:

When the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them: "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They replied: "David's". He said to them: "How then does David, inspired by the Spirit, call him 'Lord', saying: 'The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I set your enemies under your feet'? If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" (Matt.22.41-45; cf. Mk.12.35-37)

Here, Psalm 110 is cited in the context of a slightly esoteric discussion of messianic doctrine. If we assume a setting in the early church rather than in Jesus' ministry, the debate presupposes the primitive Christian appeal to Psalm 110.1 in connection with the exaltation of Jesus, which inaugurates or confirms him in his role as the Christ. When, in a creed-like passage, Paul speaks of Christ Jesus as the one "who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God..." (Rom.8.34; cf. Eph.1.20), the psalm text provides the language for speaking of the exaltation of Christ. Paul again alludes to this text without explicitly quoting it when he states that Christ "must reign until he [God] has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Cor.15.25). Taking this connection with the exalted Christ for granted, a Christian of the second generation – Mark or a predecessor – notes that the complete psalm is ascribed to David, and thus supports the Christian confession of Jesus as Lord rather than the supposed Jewish belief that the Messiah is to be the "son of David". This point is then retrojected into the ministry of Jesus. Yet, even in the second or third generation, the fundamental significance of this text is still maintained. It is the third of the three texts around which Peter's Pentecost sermon is constructed: the first has to do with the coming of the Spirit (Joel 2.28-32), the second with Jesus' resurrection (Ps.16.8-11), the third with his ascension (Ps.110.1):

Being exalted to the right hand of God, and receiving the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father, he poured out this which you see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says: "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a stool for your feet." (Acts 2.33-35)

Luke's presentation is here influenced by the earlier discussion about messiahship, which he too takes over from Mark (Lk.20.41-44): for the argument is again based on the premise of Davidic authorship. David did not himself ascend into the heavens, but he did write of someone else who did.

This reading of a psalm text in the light of the superscription (τῷ Δαυιδ ψαλμός) represents the first modest step towards a messianic understanding of the whole psalm. A further, more ambitious step is taken by the author to the Hebrews. He too cites Psalm 110.1, although his concern is to assert Jesus' superiority not to David but to angels: "But to which of the angels did he ever say, Sit at my right hand...?" (Heb.1.13). But this author is much more interested in Psalm 110.4, where he finds the scriptural key to the soteriological significance of the

exalted Christ: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek'". This divine oracle is first cited in Hebrews 5.6, in the context of a preliminary discussion of the theme of Christ's high priesthood which will dominate the central section of the letter. A further allusion to this text in 6.20 introduces the chapter-length exegesis of Hebrews 7 – much the most detailed interpretation of a single scriptural text in the whole New Testament. The author comments on each of the three main elements of this text, which he treats in reverse order: first, "... after the order of Melchizedek" (vv.1-14), second, "You are a priest for ever..." (vv.15-19), and third, "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind..." (vv.15-22). First, commenting on "... after the order of Melchizedek", the author draws on the narrative of Genesis 14 to explain who Melchizedek was, or is (Heb.7.1-3); he asserts the superiority of a Melchizedek-based priesthood over the Aaronic one, pointing out that Abraham himself paid tithes to him (vv.4-10); and he concludes from the promise of the future messianic priest that the Aaronic priesthood was always intended to be temporary and provisional (vv.11-14). Second, the author contrast a priesthood that is said to be "for ever" with one based on genealogy and therefore on mortality (vv.15-19). Third, the author notes that the appointment of the messianic priest is confirmed by an oath: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind..." (vv.20-22). A concluding description of Jesus' high priestly ministry (vv.23-28) is less exegetically based, but continues to emphasize that the messianic priesthood is "for ever" (vv.23-25, 28). In his treatment of Psalm 110, the author is self-consciously innovative in shifting the focus from the traditional proof-text for the exaltation of Christ (v.1, cited in Heb.1.13) to a text which interprets the ministry of the exalted Lord as a priesthood both older and newer than the Aaronic one. The establishing of the Aaronic priesthood is a central concern of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers; its replacement by a priesthood after the order of Melchizedek is prophetically announced by David in the psalm and anticipated in Genesis.

Early Christian interpretation is initially drawn to this psalm because of its testimony to the exaltation of Christ, and then proceeds to relate this testimony to the superscription and to find soteriological significance in the later statement about messianic priesthood. Interest centres on the two reported divine oracles through which the messianic priest is installed in his ministry: "Sit at my right hand...", and, "You are a priest for ever". In the *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin further extends the messianic exegesis of this psalm. This is indeed the first messianic text that he not only cites but also discusses in some detail – though not in order (*dial.*32-33; 63; 83). The psalm is introduced as follows, shortly after Justin's second explanation of his two advents theory:

In order to make the theme of our discussion clearer to you, I shall repeat for you some other words spoken through the blessed David, from which you will see that the Christ is also called "Lord" by the holy and prophetic Spirit, and that the Lord of all, the Father, brought him from the earth and sat him at his right hand, until he makes his enemies a stool for his feet. (*dial.*32)

When the Holy Spirit, speaking through David, announces that "the Lord said to my Lord", the reference is to the word of the Father addressed to Christ, the word that raised him from the dead and exalted him to heaven. This messianic exegesis is continued through the psalm. According to v.2, "The Lord will send forth the sceptre of your power from Zion, and he shall rule in the midst of your enemies". According to Justin, this can only be understood messianically: "Our Jesus, although not yet coming in glory, sent forth the sceptre of his power to Jerusalem, the word of calling and of repentance addressed to all nations in which

the demons held dominion..." (*dial.83*). Also of interest to Justin is the mysterious divine oracle that follows: "... Among the splendours of the holy ones, from the womb before the morning star I begot you" (Ps.110.3). For Justin, this shows that God the Father of all is to beget the Messiah "from above and through a human womb [ἄνωθεν καὶ διὰ γαστρὸς ἀνθρωπείας]" (63; cf. 83). (Other early Christian interpreters would apply this text to the pre-temporal or eternal generation of the Son, so that the womb referred to was the Father's rather than Mary's.) There follows the oracle in which the Messiah is appointed priest after the order of Melchizedek (v.4): Justin finds in this figure "a priest of those who were in uncircumcision" (*dial.33*). The psalm closes with the statement, "He will drink from the brook in the way, therefore he will lift up his head" (Ps.110.7). These words show "that he will first be a humble man, and will then be exalted" (*dial.33*). Justin continues to assume that David is the speaker here, and that he speaks of someone other than himself, that is, of the Messiah. At different points in his dialogue, Justin presents a messianic interpretation of five out of the psalm's seven verses.

Justin not only extends the range of the messianic exegesis of this psalm; he also defends it against the non-messianic interpretation attributed to Trypho and his fellow-Jews:

I am not unaware, I said, that you [pl.] presume to interpret this psalm as referring to King Hezekiah. But I shall now prove from these same words that you are wrong. "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind", it is said, and, "You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" – together with what follows and precedes. But that Hezekiah was never a priest, let alone the eternal priest of God, even you will hardly venture to deny. (*dial.33*)

Later in the dialogue, we are given a more detailed account of this Jewish anti-messianic interpretation of Psalm 110, which seems to relate primarily to the first verse. According to this interpretation, the divine oracle was addressed to King Hezekiah at the time of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem, when Hezekiah entered the temple clothed with sackcloth and ashes, but received there a message of reassurance from Isaiah (2 Kings 19 = Is.37). Justin writes:

As for the text, "The Lord said to my lord, Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies a stool for your feet", your teachers presume to apply it to Hezekiah, stating that he was told to sit on the right side of the temple when the king of Assyria sent him a threatening message, and it was revealed to him through Isaiah that he was not to be afraid.

On this reading, "The Lord said to my lord" means that God spoke to Hezekiah. "Sit at my right hand..." refers to Hezekiah's position in the temple; "... till I make your enemies a stool for your feet" promises Hezekiah that his Assyrian enemies will be overthrown. Hezekiah did not have long to wait in the temple, for the divine promise was fulfilled that very night, when "the angel of the Lord went forth and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians..." (2 Kgs.19.35). In opposition to the Christians' messianic reading of Psalm 110, Jewish interpreters propose a historical reading which seeks to locate the reference of the scriptural text in its own immediate context. Justin would hardly have invented such a reading himself, and he presumably encountered it in the context of an actual debate with a Jewish teacher. This historical, anti-messianic reading of Psalm 110 is similar to a reading of Isaiah 7.14 ("Behold, a virgin shall conceive...") which Justin is particularly anxious to refute. According to this reading, the "virgin" in the Greek text is actually a "young woman" in the

original Hebrew; and, since the oracle is addressed by Isaiah to King Ahaz, it is natural to suppose that it refers to the birth of his own son, the future King Hezekiah (*dial.*43, 67; cf. 2 Kgs.16.20). Finding Hezekiah useful for an anti-messianic interpretation of the Isaiah text, the Jewish interpreter presses him into service again in connection with Psalm 110.

Justin, of course, is convinced that absolutely nothing in this psalm fits Hezekiah. Hezekiah was not a priest (*dial.*33). He was not himself the redeemer of Jerusalem, for Jerusalem was saved by God (83). Yet this Jewish historical hermeneutic is not as easy to refute as Justin supposes, and his own assumption that Christian truth claims can be demonstrated exegetically is itself highly questionable. The Jewish anti-messianic hermeneutic is right to assume that the psalm can plausibly be read without reference to the Christian Messiah, if we use the evidence of other scriptural texts to reconstruct its original historical context. Indeed, modern critical scholarship has normally found in this psalm a reference to the kings of pre-exilic Judah, in which the archaic Jerusalem tradition of the priest-king is incorporated into the ideology of the Davidic house. In Genesis 14.18, Melchizedek is the priest-king of "Salem", probably a reference to Jerusalem. There is ample evidence that the Davidic kings took on a priestly role. Here and elsewhere, historical readings of scriptural texts do not answer all questions, but they do point us in the direction from which answers may be expected. The anti-messianic, historical readings opposed by Justin seem to anticipate the modern critical demolition of traditional apologetic appeals to the fulfilment of prophecy. In Trypho's case, they also serve to reinforce a scriptural hermeneutic centred on the practice of the Torah. The search for messianic prophecies is, perhaps, a distraction from the all-important task of living in the light of the divine commandments.

So Justin's interpretation of Psalm 110 does not achieve what he wants it to achieve. He seeks to prove that this text *can only* be understood by reference to Jesus, and to eliminate all other readings. But no such proofs are available. At no point in the Jewish scriptures or Old Testament is a reference to Jesus required in order to make sense of the text: and this is not just a concession to exegetical realism but a matter of theological principle. Christian faith is not grounded in apologetic arguments – whether these are concerned with the fulfilment of prophecy, the historicity of miracles, or the existence of God. To be Christian is to be caught up into the dynamic of the divine saving action in Christ: that is the entire point of traditional Christian language about the Holy Spirit, who according to the Nicene Creed is "the Lord, the Life-giver". From this standpoint, it will be necessary and desirable to reread scripture messianically. But such a reading cannot be independently verified. Other readings stemming from other traditions will continue to show that they have no need of the messianic hypothesis.

From a Christian theological standpoint, it cannot be overlooked that Psalm 110 and other key scriptural texts have informed and shaped Christian discourse from the very beginning. Whatever such texts may have originally meant, within the Christian tradition they have come to refer to Christ. They do so not by providing a secondary confirmation of what is already believed about Christ, independently of scripture, but by shaping and determining the original beliefs themselves. When Christian congregations confess each week that Jesus is "seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty", their acknowledgment of his exalted status is derived primarily from Psalm 110. Without the text, there would be no such belief.

From this standpoint, what a text has come to mean may be more important than what a text originally meant. Meaning is, as it were, something that happens to a text as it is read, rather than being enclosed within the text at the moment of composition. Naturally, the original authorial presentation will impose constraints on the meanings that may accrue to a text. Relatively stable verbal structures can survive the accidents of transmission; words and word-meanings may shift and slip, but continuities will still endure. The text that Justin reads in Greek in the mid-second century CE is not wholly discontinuous with the Hebrew text as it left the hand of its author sometime before the exile. Yet the gulf between the two is still considerable. It is one thing for a text to celebrate the pre-exilic Davidic monarchy, another for it to substantiate Christian claims about Jesus' divine vindication. How does such a new meaning accrue to a text? Is the text in any sense open to this new meaning?

An answer is to be found in the simple observation that Psalm 110 is a "canonical" text, a part of the canonical collection known as the psalter. The canonical collection aims to make various older or more recent texts permanently available for the use of present and future communities of faith. The underlying assumption is that these texts will prove their worth in helping to shape these communities' response to the divine. In the phenomenon of the canon, the enduring value and usefulness of its texts is as it were endorsed. Through canonization, the text is freed from the limitations of its circumstances of origin. Although it continues to bear the marks of those circumstances, the emphasis is now on the text's *availability for communal use*, and not on an antiquarian concern to preserve the traces of the past for their own sake.

In the case of Psalm 110, it is possible to imagine a canonical use of this text which refers it to Hezekiah or the pre-exilic monarchy in general. If Trypho interprets the text in this way, he need not be contravening the canonical principle. The canonical history of the pre-exilic monarchy is itself intended to be religiously edifying, and its value as such might be enhanced by linking it to the royal psalms. Hezekiah, a pious king threatened with annihilation by his enemies, receives the good news of a stupendous divine act of deliverance, not just from the lips of the prophet Isaiah, his contemporary, but also from an ancient prophecy of his father David, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Plausible or not, that is hardly unedifying. Yet there is nothing obligatory about this reference of the psalm to Hezekiah. In its canonical form, this text has been detached from its original setting within ancient Judahite royal ideology and now offers itself to later communities of faith, to be used – or not used – as they see fit. In using the text as they do, early Christian readers simply respond to the canonical invitation.

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